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# Beyond the Ballot

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The US President Bush called last month's Iraqi elections a "major milestone in the march to democracy." They are indeed a milestone — just not the kind that Washington would welcome. Disregarding the standard declarations of benign intent on the part of leaders, let's review the history. When Bush and Britain's Prime Minister, Tony Blair, invaded Iraq, the pretext, insistently repeated, was a "single question": Will Iraq eliminate its weapons of mass destruction?

Within a few months this "single question" was answered the wrong way. Then, very quickly, the real reason for the invasion became Bush's "messianic mission" to bring democracy to Iraq and the Middle East. Even apart from the timing, the democratisation bandwagon runs up against the fact that the United States has tried, in every possible way, to prevent elections in Iraq.

Last January's elections came about because of mass nonviolent resistance, for which the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani became a symbol. (The violent insurgency is another creature altogether from this popular movement.) Few competent observers would disagree with the editors of the Financial Times, who wrote last March that "the reason (the elections)

took place was the insistence of the Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who vetoed three schemes by the US-led occupation authorities to shelve or dilute them."

Elections, if taken seriously, mean you pay some attention to the will of the population. The crucial question for an invading army is: "Do they want us to be here?"

There is no lack of information about the answer. One important source is a poll for the British Ministry of Defence this past August, carried out by Iraqi university researchers and leaked to the British Press. It found that 82 per cent are "strongly opposed" to the presence of coalition troops and less than 1 per cent believe they are responsible for any improvement in security.

Analysts of the Brookings Institution in Washington report that in November, 80 per cent of Iraqis favoured "near-term US troop withdrawal." Other sources generally concur. So the coalition forces should withdraw, as the population wants them to, instead of trying desperately to set up a client regime with military forces that they can control. But Bush and Blair still refuse to set a timetable for withdrawal, limiting themselves to token withdrawals as their goals are achieved.

There's a good reason why the United States cannot tolerate a sovereign, more or less democratic Iraq. The issue can scarcely be raised because it conflicts with firmly established doctrine: We're supposed to believe that the United States would have invaded Iraq if it was an island in the Indian Ocean and its main export was pickles, not petroleum.

As is obvious to anyone not committed to the party line, taking control of Iraq will enormously strengthen US power over global energy resources, a crucial lever of world control. Suppose that Iraq were to become sovereign and democratic. Imagine the policies it would be likely to pursue. The Shia population in the South, where much of Iraq's oil is, would have a predominant influence. They would prefer friendly relations with Shia Iran.

The relations are already close. The Badr brigade, the militia that mostly controls the south, was trained in Iran. The highly influential clerics also have long-standing relations with Iran, including Sistani, who grew up there. And the Shia-dominant interim government has already begun to establish economic and possibly military relations with Iran.

Furthermore, right across the border in Saudi Arabia is a substantial, bitter Shia population. Any move toward independence in Iraq is likely to increase efforts to gain a degree of autonomy and justice there, too. This also happens to be the region where most of Saudi Arabia's oil is. The outcome could be a loose Shia alliance comprising Iraq, Iran and the major oil regions of Saudi Arabia, independent of Washington and controlling large portions of the world's oil reserves. It's not unlikely that an independent bloc of this kind might follow Iran's lead in developing major energy projects jointly with China and India.

Iran may give up on Western Europe, assuming that it will be unwilling to act independently of the United States. China, however, can't be intimidated. That's why the United States is so frightened by China.

China is already establishing relations with Iran — and even with Saudi Arabia, both military and economic. There is an Asian energy security grid, based on China and Russia, but probably bringing in India, Korea and others. If Iran moves in that direction, it can become the lynchpin of that power grid.

Such developments, including a sovereign Iraq and possibly even major Saudi energy resources, would be the ultimate nightmare for Washington. Also, a labour movement is forming in Iraq, a very important one. Washington insists on keeping Saddam Hussein's bitter anti-labour laws, but the labour movement continues its organising work despite them.

Their activists are being killed. Nobody knows by whom, maybe by insurgents, maybe by former Baathists, maybe by somebody else. But they're persisting. They constitute one of

the major democratising forces that have deep roots in Iraqi history, and that might revitalise, also much to the horror of the occupying forces. One critical question is how Westerners will react. Will we be on the side of the occupying forces trying to prevent democracy and sovereignty? Or will we be on the side of the Iraqi people?